

Comoros



Haphazardly scattered across the Indian Ocean, the mysterious, outrageous and enchanting Comoros islands are the kind of place you go to just drop off the planet for a while. Far removed from the clutter that comes with conventional paradises – sprawling hotels, neon discos – the Comoros are so remote even an international fugitive could hide out here.

Rich in Swahili culture, and devoutly Muslim, the charming inhabitants come from a legendary stock of Arab traders, Persian sultans, African slaves and Portuguese pirates. The four developed islands offer everything from relaxing on white-sand beaches by turquoise seas to hiking through rainforests on the lookout for giant bats.

Nicknamed ‘Cloud Coup-Coup’ land because of their crazy politics, the three independent islands (the fourth, Mayotte, is still a part of France) have experienced almost 20 coups since gaining independence in 1975! In fact, a Comorian president is lucky if there’s time for his official portrait to be taken before armed men are once again knocking on the door. In the last decade, however, the quarrelsome tiff-prone independent islands agreed to put their differences aside and fly under the joint banner of the Union des Comores.

Holidaying in the Comoros isn’t for everyone; travel will kick your arse at times. But it teaches lessons in patience, humility and resilience. Everything moves *mora mora* (slowly slowly) and tourism facilities are far from plush. Islam, and all its traditions, is evident everywhere. Women are expected to show modesty and cover up, and alcohol is a no-no for both sexes.

But if your idea of the perfect holiday is less about drinking rum punch in a skimpy bikini at a swank resort, and more about long, lazy days sipping tea and talking politics with the locals, then a safari in the exotic Comoros will probably be the kind of unpredictable, swashbuckling adventure you’ve been craving.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Wandering the labyrinthine stone streets of Moroni’s old **Arab quarter** (p241)
- Exploring the smallest, wildest and most interesting Comore, **Mohéli** (p245), with fabulous beaches and turquoise seas
- Hiking through the cool, misty highlands and clove and ylang-ylang scented beachside plantations of **Anjouan** (p249)
- Swimming with sea turtles off the coast of Mayotte in **Sazilé** (p261)
- Camping in the desert landscape created by the 2005 eruption of **Mt Karthala** (p237)



■ HIGHEST POINT: 2360m ■ PRINCIPAL LANGUAGES: Arabic, French, Shishimiwa (Swahili)

GRANDE COMORE

pop 360,000

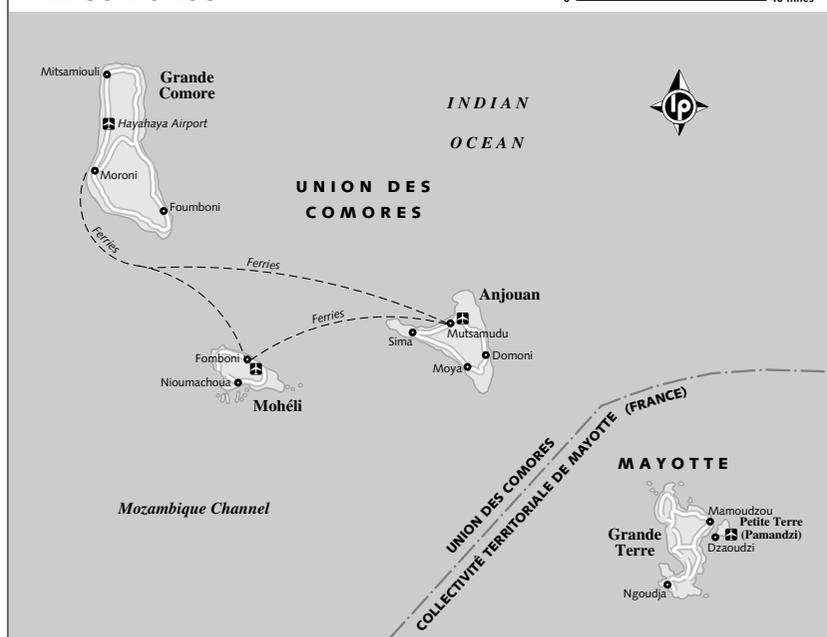
The biggest (and most politically bullying) of the three islands, Grande Comore is also dominated by the largest active volcano in the world, Mt Karthala (2360m) – over the last 200 years it has consistently erupted once every 11 years on average. The last eruption spewed lava for a full 14 days in December 2005. It flattened villages, contaminated drinking water and killed at least one child. This came on the heels of the tourism crisis of 2002, when the islands’ switch to a new constitution had foreign state departments warning people to steer clear for a while. Mt Karthala’s eruption only further decimated the island’s already struggling tourism industry. This is a shame, because two years after the explosion Grande Comore has picked up the pieces. And the good news that has come out of the volcano’s latest blast is the spectacular desert landscape it created on the mountain – the hiking is particularly fantastic, and unique, these days.

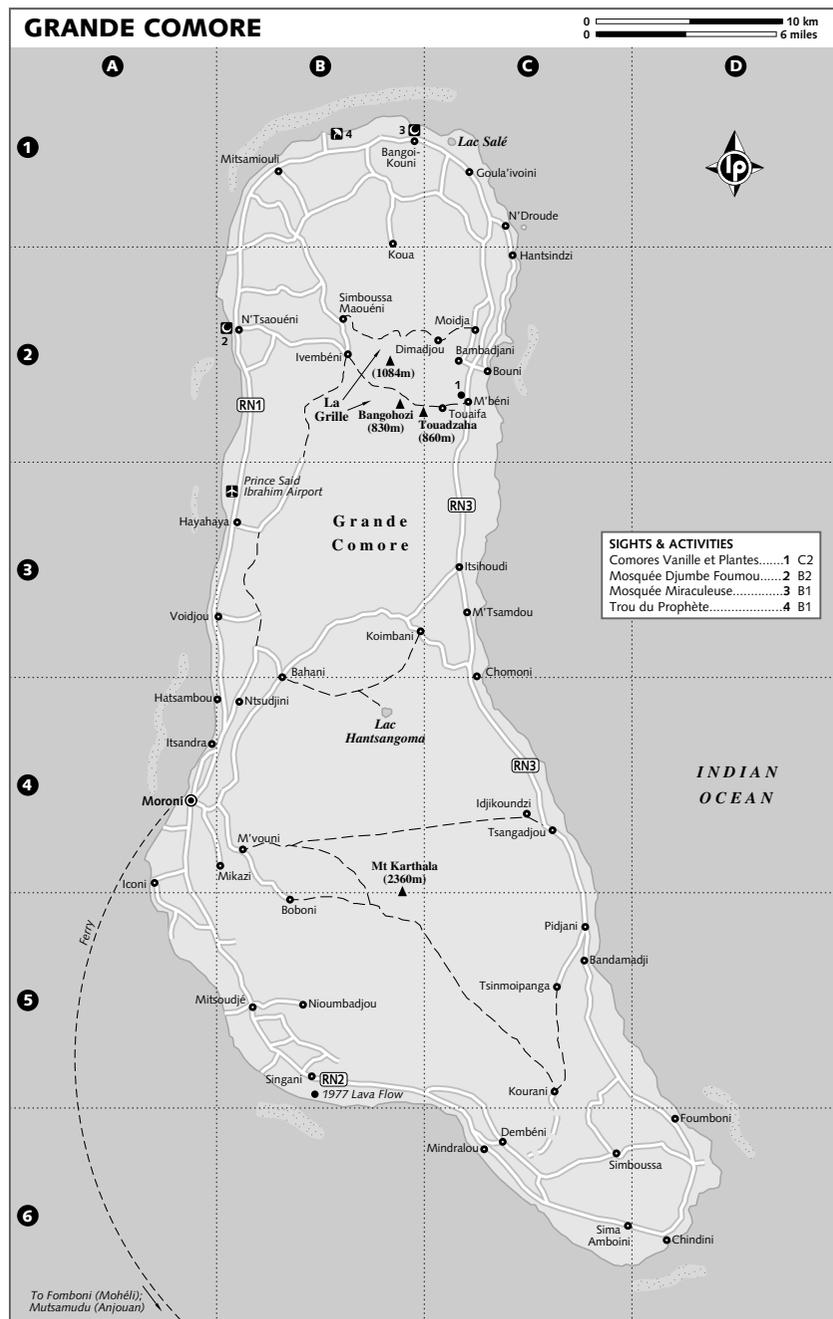
Aside from being the largest island at 60km by 20km, Grande Comore is also the most economically developed of the three independent islands that make up the Union des Comores. Grande Comore (known as Ngazidja by the Comorians) wields the most political power of the three islands from the seat of its handsome main town, Moroni. The island is fringed by solidified lava and sandy beaches of various hues, where brilliant white meets dark volcanic grey and molten black. What little agricultural land is still available is found in the south, where there are banana, breadfruit, cassava, vanilla, ylang-ylang and coconut plantations. Most of the island’s population and activity is concentrated on the west coast. The sparsely populated and dramatically beautiful east coast remains quiet and traditional, with only a few tiny thatched-hut villages. Couples looking for a simple but romantic holiday away from everyone else will like it here.

History

For information on the history of the Comoros, see p29.

THE COMOROS





Orientation

Grande Comore's Prince Saïd Ibrahim Airport lies about 19km north of Moroni, the capital, in the village of Hayahaya. Boats arriving in Grande Comore come into the port in central Moroni. Moroni is the only place on the island with any real infrastructure, but tarmac roads in reasonably good condition run around the perimeter of the island, with those in the north being in the best condition.

After a short time travelling around Grande Comore, you will notice one annoying factor: there are no signposts anywhere. To know where you are and where you are going, you will have to guess, follow a detailed map or keep asking people.

Information

Grande Comore, like the other islands in the group, is overwhelmingly (and tolerantly) Muslim. Visitors are asked to dress modestly when away from the beach, meaning no shorts or low-cut tops for women, and no bare-chested men. Topless swimming or sunbathing are not acceptable. During the holy month of Ramadan (see p266), the population of the Comoros fasts from dawn to dusk and most restaurants are closed. Shops and other businesses open earlier and close earlier during this period as well, especially on Fridays. Travellers should respect the sensibilities of the population and refrain from eating, drinking or smoking in public during daylight hours. During the rest of the year, nearly everything in the Comoros shuts down between Friday afternoon and Monday morning – be prepared.

Grande Comore has telephone and postal services in the larger cities. The island also boasts a limited, but growing, mobile phone network. Note that even with a local SIM card calls are still very expensive. There are now internet cafés all around the island, not just in Moroni (p239), although whether they are open depends on whether Grande Comore has any power, which is never a given.

The **BIC** (☎ 73 12 04; Pl de France) in Moroni can change cash and travellers cheques and does Visa cash advances when the phone lines are working. It's best to just bring as many euros with you as you plan to spend – it saves a lot of time and they can be changed anywhere on the islands, from banks to hotels. There are no moneychanging facilities at the airport so make sure you have enough euros (or at a pinch – and be ready to get ripped off – US

dollars) to get a taxi to your hotel and to last until you get to a bank.

El Maarouf Hospital (Map p240; ☎ 73 26 04; Rte Magoudjou, Moroni) has been revamped with a large injection of overseas aid, and is now just about acceptable for minor medical problems although it still routinely runs out of plasters and medicine. If you can't get to the hospital, and you are badly hurt, you can try ringing the **police** (Map p240; ☎ 74 46 63; Ave des Ministères, Moroni) for help. They are also useful for non-medical emergencies. You should have travel insurance, as any major medical problems will require you to be airlifted to South Africa.

Activities

Grande Comore's water activities are pretty much limited to the dive company listed here, but the island is home to some good swimming beaches and fabulous volcano hikes.

DIVING

Grande Comore is the only island of the independent Comoros that has a proper dive centre. **Itsandra Plongée** (off Map p240; ☎ 73 29 76; poumka@ifrance.com; 1 dive/5 dives CF20,000/75,300, NAUI Open Water course CF115,000), based on the beach in the village of Itsandra, is French-run and by all accounts fairly reputable. It's not always open, however, so it's best to ring or email them in advance.

HIKING

Grande Comore has some very rewarding hikes, including to Mt Karthala and La Grille.

Mt Karthala

This is one of the world's most active volcanoes and forms the base for much of the island. The volcano last erupted in 2005, which was both tragic – one child died and villages were damaged – but also beautiful, as its lava carved a stupendous desert out of the mountain landscape. It's possible to climb Mt Karthala in a very long day, but it's much more fun to carry camping equipment and spend a day or two exploring the summit. The trek should only be attempted during the dry season (between April and November). The most popular routes begin at M'vouni or further up at Boboni. However, the road between M'vouni and Boboni is almost impassable by normal vehicles, so you will have to take a 4WD or trek there. It takes at least seven

hours to climb from M'vouni to the summit and about five hours from Boboni.

Although the summit and the crater are frequently clear, the slopes are normally blanketed in thick mist for much of the day. The best and most sheltered camp site is within the crater itself. Especially since the latest eruption, it's really important to take a guide along. Be sure to carry all the food and water you'll need for the trip, and don't underestimate the amount of water you'll require. Unless you are really fit, you may want to take a porter, which should cost less than half of what you end up paying for a guide.

Chauffera (☎ 73 02 16) is a Moroni guide recommended by readers who also provides sleeping bags and tents. He is very professional and friendly, and charges about CF65,000 for a two-day trip. Bartering is possible.

Comores Travel Services (☎ 77 00 55; comotour@yahoo.fr; Mbéni; tent hire CF5000, 2-day expedition per person CF76,000) is also recommended. The company specialises in taking walkers up the volcano and hires camping equipment. When arranging a trip, be sure to sort out any particulars, such as who will provide and carry food, water and equipment, before you leave. Also make sure you find out the full price before departing, so there are no problems at the end.

Getting There & Around

Patience is the key to getting around Grande Comore particularly along the east coast. It can take hours for buses to show up, if they do, and breakdowns are frequent. Boats can be absolute death-traps, with no safety regulations enforced (if any even exist) and no life jackets. They are rickety affairs that look like their weathered wood has been patched up one too many times. Seas in the Comoros can get very rough, and boats between the three islands will not travel if the water is too rough. The independent islands don't much like French-owned Mayotte, believing it should belong to them, and boat travel between it and the other Comoros is pretty much nonexistent. Airlines, however, care more about profit than politics, so it is easy to fly.

AIR

Grande Comore is currently served by the following international airlines:

Air Austral (Map p240; ☎ 73 31 44; www.air-austral.com in French; Quartier Oasis, Moroni) Flies several times a week between Moroni, Mayotte, Mauritius and Réunion. Connections in Mayotte for flights to Madagascar.

Air Madagascar (Map p240; ☎ 73 55 40; www.airmadagascar.mg; Quartier Oasis, Moroni) Used to fly between Moroni and Mahajanga on the west coast of Madagascar, with connections to Antananarivo. At the time of research this service was suspended, but it may well be worth checking to see if it's resumed.

Air Seychelles (Map p240; ☎ 73 31 44; www.airseychelles.net; Rue Magoudjou, Quartier Oasis, Moroni) Weekly flights between Moroni and Malé and connections through Paris.

As well as the international flights listed above, Grande Comore is served by two internal airlines, Comores Aviation and Comores Air Service, which fly their small planes almost daily to the islands of Anjouan and Mohéli. Comores Aviation also provides services to Mayotte.

Comores Aviation (Map p240; ☎ 73 34 00; comores.avi@sntp.km; Blvd de la Corniche, Moroni) and **Comores Air Service** (Map p240; ☎ 73 33 66; cas@sntp.com; Blvd El Marrouf, Moroni) provide a reasonably efficient and easy way to fly between the islands. A hop from Moroni to Mohéli costs around CF20,000, and flights go three times a week. To Mayotte the fare is CF44,500 (also three flights per week). Comores Air Service does a circular ticket taking in all three islands for CF72,000. Both airlines can also fly you to Mahajanga (CF109,000) in Madagascar once a week.

BOAT

Boats regularly ply between Grande Comore and the other islands in the archipelago, although finding one to Mayotte (not in the good graces of the other three islands that claim it as their own) can be difficult. Anjouan is probably the easiest destination to get to. If you've got a bit longer to wait you could find a boat to go further afield without too much difficulty – the usual destinations are Zanzibar, Mombasa in Kenya, or Mahajanga in Madagascar. To find a boat, head for the port in Moroni where various makeshift offices along the seafront display the latest comings and goings on blackboards outside.

Please note that the safety and quality of boats vary widely and some vessels are so shaky they are downright scary. Life jackets on any boat are a rare thing, and if the seas are too rough your driver will turn around. Try to see the vessel before you buy your ticket as some are true death-traps. One of the best ferries is *Alliance des Îles* to Anjouan (CF11,500, five hours). To Mohéli boats are smaller and

less frequent, as the port is often ignored by bigger ships (CF9150, four to six hours).

CAR

Hiring a car on Grande Comore can only be arranged in Moroni. Prices are reasonably standard – €40 per day, plus petrol. Most cars come with a driver for the same price, which is a good thing since the roads are steep and winding and signposts nonexistent.

TAXI-BROUSSE

Long-distance routes are served by taxis-brousses (bush taxis), which mostly take the form of minibuses, although there are a few *bâchés* (small, converted pick-ups) too. Because the east coast is so sparsely populated, very few taxis-brousses travel between M'beni or Pidjani and Chomoni, so circling the entire island by public transport is very difficult (but not impossible). Like everything else on the island, public transport seems to slow down between 11.30am and 3pm, and after dark (or by 4pm during Ramadan) it virtually stops.

MORONI

pop 44,518

Moroni feels like another world. It is a timeless place where the air is heavy with romanticised Arabia – a great introduction to the Comoros if you've just arrived. Wandering the narrow streets of the old Arab quarter, you'll pass women in colourful wraps chatting on crumbling stone doorsteps, and grave groups of white-robed men whiling away the hours between prayers with games of dominoes played on smooth stone benches. Unfortunately, the place is quite dirty – throwing rubbish on the street is common practice, and the government has yet to figure out what to do with sewage and waste water. As a result, the odour emitting from these quaint streets can be rather disillusioning.

Moroni had its beginnings as the seat of an ancient sultanate that traded primarily with Zanzibar (in Tanzania). In Comorian, the name means 'in the heart of the fire', in reference to its proximity to Mt Karthala. At sunset Moroni harbour must be one of the most beautiful sights in the Indian Ocean. The fading orange light is reflected by the coral-walled Ancienne Mosquée du Vendredi (Old Friday Mosque, p241), the whitewashed buildings of the seafront and the dozens of wooden boats moored between volcanic rock

jetties. At dusk there are often hundreds of men and boys swimming here, with the giant silhouettes of fruit bats flapping overhead.

Orientation

From the airport at Hayahaya, the quickest and easiest way into Moroni is by hopping into a shared taxi with some other passengers, which will cost you CF1000 (about €2). If you arrive in the port, you can simply walk or hail a shared taxi to take you to your chosen hotel.

From the north a couple of main roads lead to the appropriately named Ave des Ministères, where there are some government offices, including the tourist office. The confusing *medina* (old Arab quarter), with its maze of narrow lanes, is found between the harbour and the bazaar. The Ave de Republic Populaire de China, which passes the port and stadium, is thus named because it ends at the huge, incongruous and Chinese-built Peoples' Palace, a long low building with arched windows that resembles a shopping arcade.

Information

The Comoros recently split its phone and postal services, but hasn't gone about changing names yet, and it seems to be arbitrary which post offices sell phonecards and which sell stamps. You'll probably need to try a few.

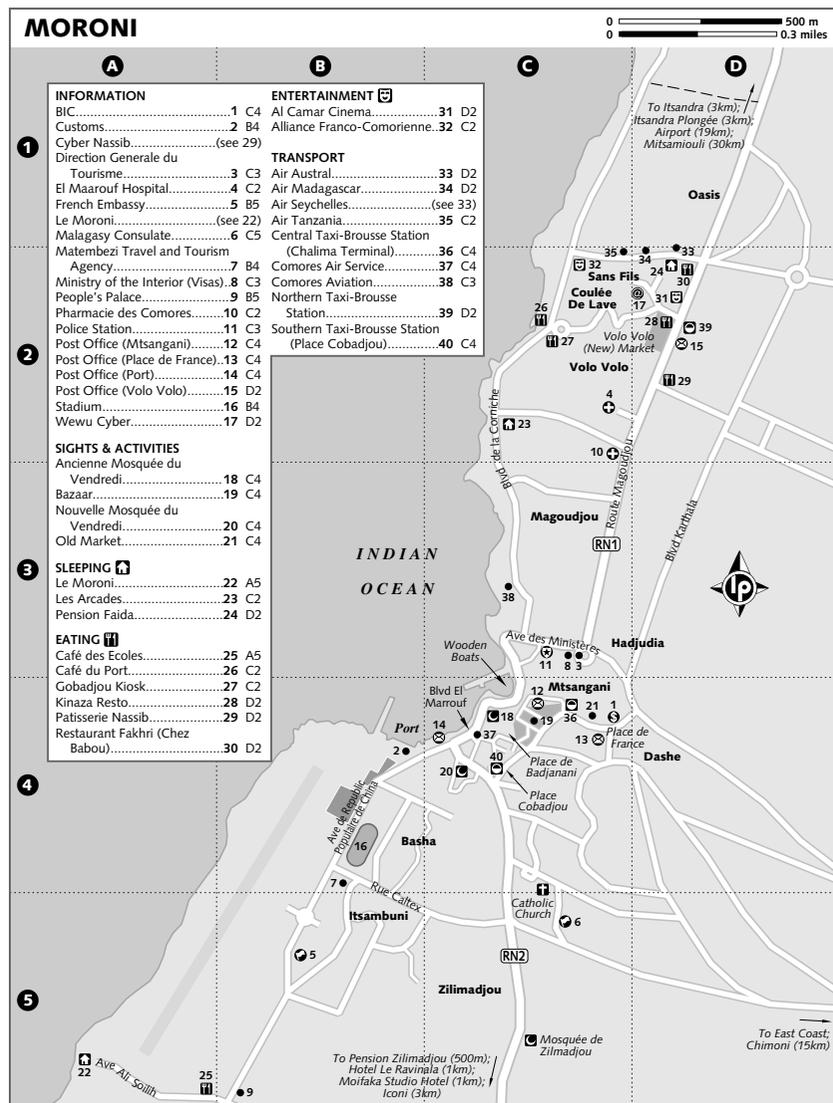
If you just need to use a card phone for a few minutes, there are always touts posted outside phone booths more than willing to let you use their phonecard – for a small commission of course. Still it works out cheaper if you're just ringing a hotel or two, as you only pay for the units (block of minutes) you use. Plus it saves you from partaking in an often frustrating search for a phonecard!

New internet cafés are opening (and closing) around town every month.

BIC (☎ 73 12 04; Pl de France; ☎ 7.15am–2pm Mon–Thu, to 11am Fri) The only place to change cash or travellers cheques. Also does advances on Visa cards for a hefty commission and has a branch of Western Union. It closes one hour earlier during Ramadan. BIC maintains two ATMs in town, but these only seem to accept local cards.

Cyber Nassib (☎ 73 25 00; per hr CF900) In the popular café of the same name; has a fast connection and headsets for internet phone calls and is popular with teenage gamers. Connections are fast and cheap for the Comoros.

Direction Generale du Tourisme (☎ 74 42 43; dg.tourisme@sntp.km; Ave des Ministères; ☎ 7.30am–2.30pm Mon–Thu, to 11.30am Fri) There's no official tourist



office in Moroni, but you can get a helpful list of hotels and *pensions* from this government-run organisation.

Le Moroni (☎ 73 52 42/64/74; lemoroni@bow.snpt.km; Ave Ali Soilih) This upmarket hotel organises day trips taking in all the island's major attractions. A boat trip to the beaches in the north of the island costs €35 per person, a full-day island tour costs €45, and a two-day expedition up Mt Karthala is €200. All prices are based on a group of four.

Matembezi Travel and Tourism Agency (☎ 73 04 00; agence.matembezi@snpt.km; Rue Caltex) This very professional and friendly tour operator can organise hikes, picnics and other full- or half-day trips for around €35. It also organises hikes up Mt Karthala, and rents cars with or without a driver from €45 per day, excluding fuel.

Pharmacie des Comores (☎ 73 22 73; Rte Magoudjou; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-7pm Sat-Thu, 8-11.30am & 4-7pm

Fri) Try this place for minor medical problems. See p237 for details of emergency medical services in Moroni.

Post offices (☎ 7.30am-2.30pm Mon-Thu, to 11am Fri) All four post offices have phone boxes but not all sell phonecards. The post offices also offer internet access for CF500 per hour.

Sights

ARAB QUARTER (OLD TOWN)

The area around the port and the Ancienne Mosquée du Vendredi (Old Friday Mosque) is a convoluted *medina* with narrow streets lined with buildings dating back to Swahili times. It's reminiscent of a miniature version of Zanzibar's Stone Town and almost as intriguing. Here you can spend at least an hour wandering aimlessly, chatting with locals or joining in a game of dominoes or *baò* (an ancient African game played using a board carved with 32 holes). Watch for the elaborately carved Swahili doors found on many houses.

MOSQUES

The most imposing structure along the waterfront is the off-white **Ancienne Mosquée du Vendredi**, a two-storey building with elegant colonnades and a square minaret. The original structure dates back to 1427, though the minaret was added early last century.

Today Friday worship takes place at the magnificent **Nouvelle Mosquée du Vendredi** (New Friday Mosque) next to the port. In between prayers, the steps outside the mosques serve as a meeting place for the town's menfolk, many dressed in the traditional *kanzu* (long white robe) and *kofia* (skull cap). To see the interior of any of the mosques, you have to be male, appropriately dressed (in long trousers) and go through the ritual washing of the feet before entering.

BAZAAR & OLD MARKET

Moroni's bazaar and old covered market, which sprawl down the road past the BIC, are a hectic mess of noise, smell and colour. Women in gaily coloured *chiromani* (cloth wraps), their faces plastered in yellow sandalwood paste, huddle over piles of fruit, vegetables and fish, waving off clouds of flies and trying to avoid being crushed by the throngs of pedestrians and vehicles jostling through the bottleneck. In among it all are wide boys (hawkers) flogging plastic sunglasses, Muslim zealots haranguing the crowds, and toddlers playing in the dust. The men in the bazaar generally don't mind being

photographed or filmed, although it's polite to ask first. The women will either screech refusals and wave you away, or demand money for their pictures.

Sleeping

Moroni has more options than anywhere else in the independent Comoros, although all will seem way overpriced if you've just arrived from Madagascar.

Pension Faïda (☎ 73 22 11; Quartier Oasis; r CF7500-15,000) The budget traveller's choice, Faïda has rooms in a family home either with private bath and fan or shared facilities. It's a bit rickety (the handles fall off the doors) and lacking in polish with tatty walls, but friendly and homely. Monsieur will hire himself and his car out for excursions for CF15,000 per day, plus petrol.

Les Arcades (☎ 73 19 42; Blvd de la Corniche; r CF11,500-44,500, breakfast €4; ☎ ☎) This big pink edifice has so many different types of rooms it's hard to get your head around them. The cheaper ones have simple décor and come with TV, mozzie nets and air-con, while deluxe rooms are super smart and huge – some even have two showers! The pool looks a bit murky, but on-site massage is offered and there are terraced gardens for strolling.

Hotel Le Ravinala (☎ 73 51 90; r CF16,000-20,000; ☎) Although very welcoming and friendly, this *pension* is difficult to find and far out of town. Screened rooms have TV and telephones but shared bathrooms. Bigger rooms with bathroom (full-size bath) and nets are also available. There's a comfortable sitting room and a restaurant (red-bean curry CF2500) so you don't have to wander far.

Moifaka Studio Hotel (☎ 73 15 56; hmoifaka@snpt.km; s/d from CF17,000/19,000; ☎ ☎) Moifaka is an excellent option if you can do without the extra amenities provided by Le Moroni. Rooms are modern, clean and tiled, with TV and good en suite bathrooms. The most expensive rooms have satellite TV and air-con. The only disadvantage is that it's hard to find, as it's out of town in the suburbs towards Iconi. Take a taxi.

Le Moroni (☎ 73 52 42; lemoroni@bow.snpt.km; Ave Ali Soilih; s/d from €72/102; ☎ ☎ ☎) Moroni's only international-standard hotel is the place to stay if you're feeling homesick for Western amenities. It features a business centre, swimming pool, excursion desk, bar, restaurant and even giant chess! The new-looking rooms are comfortable, have satellite TV and come in

two price tags – standard and luxe. The only difference between the two is a lack of safe and minibar in the standard rooms, and neither is worth paying an extra €20 for! The terrace restaurant overlooking the sea serves recommended pizzas along with the usual steaks and seafood from CF4500. There are a couple of decent vegetarian options too. Breakfast costs CF3000.

Eating & Drinking

Eating and drinking options are limited in Moroni, especially if you're here during Ramadan. The cheapest eats in town are the little food stalls and hole-in-the-wall restaurants along Rue Caltex and Blvd de la Corniche. **Café des Écoles** (Ave Ali Silihi), on the road towards Le Moroni, is one such place. It serves delicious fresh fruit juices. Café du Port, at the roundabout, is an alternative young Comorian hang-out that serves alcohol. You'll find it packed with animated locals chatting about life and politics over beers until dawn. The best coffee, cakes and crepes come from the **Gobadjou kiosk** (street eats per item CF150), also on the roundabout. Run by a friendly old man, it has chairs under a tree, and doubles as a taxi rank.

Kinaza Resto (☎ 73 27 68; Rte Magoudjou; mains from CF500; 🍴 lunch & dinner) This restaurant recommended by readers serves a wide choice of food, including samosas, Comorian rice dishes and even burgers at more than fair prices.

Pâtisserie Nassib (☎ 73 84 60; Rte Magoudjou; pastries from CF500, mains from CF2000; 🕒 6am–11pm; 🍰) The best pâtisserie in town turns into a very popular little café at night, serving burgers, kebabs and rice dishes on a pleasant terrace. In the morning come for fresh fruit juice, yogurt and crispy just-baked baguettes. If it's just bread and cake you're after, there's a bustling stall selling both out front.

our pick **Restaurant Fakhri** (Chez Babou; ☎ 73 21 29; Quartier Oasis; mains CF4000; 🍴 lunch & dinner Tue–Sun) Run by a family of voluble Indians, this is definitely the liveliest restaurant in town, featuring a huge terrace lit up with fairy lights and an outdoor ice-cream bar. The menu includes kebabs (cooked on an open barbecue), huge curry dishes (one portion is enough for two people), samosas and sandwiches, plus lots of fresh juice. There are also vegetarian options. The ice cream is to die for, and half the town turns up to get it in the evenings.

Entertainment

Films and concerts are shown regularly at the **Alliance Franco-Comorienne** (☎ 73 10 87; afc@snt.km; Blvd de la Corniche; 🎬 7.30am–10pm Mon–Sat). The cultural centre also offers French courses, sports classes and even cabaret and karaoke! There's a library with French books, magazines and videos, internet access (per hour CF500), regular exhibitions and a hall for concerts. Films, which are all dubbed into French, cost CF300 and are shown weekly. Some activities are only open to members. The **cafeteria** (snacks CF1200; 🕒 7.30am–10pm Mon–Sat) serves alcohol.

Getting There & Around

There are three taxi-brousse stations in Moroni. The northern taxi-brousse station, near the new market in Volo Volo, serves the north and east. Vehicles here go to Itsandra (CF300, 20 minutes), the airport at Hayahaya (CF500, 30 minutes), Mitsamiouli (CF500, one hour), and as far as M'beni on the northeast coast. For destinations in central Grande Comore, mainly Chomoni (CF500, 40 minutes), taxis-brousses leave from the Chalima terminal, which is hidden away in the labyrinthine old town – ask a local to lead the way.

To southern destinations such as Fomboni (CF700, 1½ hours), taxis-brousses leave from the southern taxi-brousse station at Place Cobadjou, near the New Friday Mosque.

Once in town, getting around is as easy as walking or flagging down one of the hundreds of shared taxis, which will pick you up and deposit you anywhere in town for CF300, or a bit more for further destinations. You can easily take a shared taxi from town to the airport (CF1000), Itsandra (CF500) or Iconi (CF500).

To hire a car, ask at one of the hotels. Many taxi drivers double as one-man rental companies and can be hired out for the day. You get the driver as well. Car hire costs around CF15,000 per day.

ITSANDRA

Much less hectic, cleaner and prettier than Moroni, yet only 4km away, the village of Itsandra is a great place to base yourself during a stay in Grande Comore. There is a startling white-sand beach with super clear water, although it is definitely not isolated – groups of locals linger here all day, but this is pretty much true for any Grande Comore beach. The village has an excellent choice of hotels.

We only had space to include a few here, so wander around (it's a very small village) and see if something else catches your eye.

Motel Vanille (☎ 73 28 08; RN1; r from CF13,000) is a very good-value place and ideal if you want to be out of Moroni. Rooms have a sitting area, satellite TV, kitchen with fridge, bedroom with fan and mosquito net, and private bathroom. There's a supermarket underneath the hotel, and the owners will arrange for a cleaner if you're staying longer than a few days. You can also order a few Comorian specialities to be cooked for you (meals from CF2000). Car hire is available for around CF15,000 per day.

Another excellent place to stay that's been recommended by readers is **Pension Manguiér** (☎ 73 20 81; RN1; r incl breakfast CF7500). The owner, Maoulida, is very friendly and helpful, and rooms, while simple, are clean, quiet and peaceful.

Itsandra is near enough to Moroni for you to take a shared taxi (CF300) into town to eat in the evenings.

HATSAMBOU

On the coast 3km north of Itsandra is the village of Hatsambou, visible from RN1 about 20m lower than the road. The Comoros is the world's second-largest producer of vanilla (after Madagascar) and here, on the inland side of the main road, is a small shed where **green vanilla** is graded and sorted. The workers can explain the vanilla producing and sorting processes (in French).

The **Royal Itsandra Hotel** (☎ 73 35 17; itsandrahote@snt.km; RN1; r from €58; 🍴) is now the only up-market beach hotel in Grande Comore. It's not especially charming, but entirely acceptable and with a lovely private beach and a good restaurant (mains from CF3000) – try the fish soup. Rooms are spacious, light and have sea views as well as a telephone, TV and full-size bathtub. There's a casino and piano bar providing nightlife, and every so often the hotel does a seafood buffet outside among the palm trees. Transfers from the airport can be arranged for CF5000 per car.

N'TSAOUÉNI

The sleepy village of N'Tsaouéni is also believed to be the final resting place of Caliph Mohammed Athoumani Kouba, a cousin of the Prophet Mohammed, and one of the founders of Islam in the Comoros. The lo-

cation of his tomb is the subject of some dispute, but the best case can be made for the recently renovated **tomb** beside the old and crumbling Friday mosque. The building housing the tomb has a magnificently carved door, and the tomb itself is inside a larger cement structure, draped in colourful cloths. To see the tomb, ask the guardian, who lives in the house opposite the door, to let you in.

MITSAMILOULI

pop 6332

With a long sandy beach that's popular with youth playing pick-up football, Mitsamiouli, on the island's northern tip, is the second-largest town on Grande Comore. However, like Itsandra, the beaches are a bit public for sunbathing or relaxing, and there isn't a lot of shade. Because Mitsamiouli was home for years to a luxury South African hotel, many of the locals here speak some English.

Le Maloudja (☎ 78 81 56; r with breakfast CF15,000; 🍴), the only place to stay in Mitsamiouli since the demise of Grande Comore's only five-star hotel, is fairly decent, with simple, no-frills rooms, although it is a bit grimy. It's in a lovely spot, however, right on a magnificent beach and next to a small pocket of forest that's good for watching birds and even lemurs.

our pick **Cool Memories** (Rue du Ralima; local dishes CF1200; 🍴 lunch & dinner) is an excellent place serving local food in the centre of the village. Owner Zoro organises cultural tourism excursions around town. The interior is black and white with famous quotes on the walls. The exterior has an abstract tropical paint job, and there is a great central courtyard. Look for it one block back from the sea road.

TROU DU PROPHETE

The French name of this small bay, 2km east of Le Maloudja hotel, translates rather inelegantly as 'hole of the prophet'. Its much prettier local name is Zindoni. Legend has it that the Prophet Mohammed once made landfall in the harbour, and it almost certainly once served as a haven for 17th-century pirates. It's now a popular leisure spot bordered by a few French holiday villas, including the former home of Bob Denard (p31). It's signposted off the main road, but doesn't have much of a beach.

THE POMPEII OF GRANDE COMORE

The village of **Singani**, on the way from Moroni to Fomboni, likes to think of itself as the Pompeii of the Indian Ocean, and with pretty good reason. During the eruption of Mt Karthala in April 1977, locals spoke of the 'sky turning red like sunset'. The lava flow swept through the village, destroying everything in its path – only the school was spared.

Two weeks before the eruption occurred, a madman had taken to running through the village streets, warning people of an impending eruption. No-one listened, but three days prior to the eruption the earth began to quake and the man's warnings were taken more seriously. After the initial eruption, the village was evacuated before the lava reached the inhabited area and no-one was threatened except the man himself, who elected to remain in the school. Strangely enough, the stream of lava parted and spared the building. There he remained for several days until rescuers managed to dig through the lava. By that time, he'd lost whatever grip he'd ever had on reality. The only people in Singani who benefited from the volcano were the local football team – the ash was levelled into a large playing field.

BANGOI-KOUNI & LAC SALÉ

No-one in the small village of Bangoi-Kouni, about 3km further on, knows the origins of the so-called **Mosquée Miraculeuse** (Miracle Mosque). According to local legend it's reputed to have constructed itself in a single night.

Another legend connected with the village is that of the nearby **Lac Salé**. A sorcerer supposedly arrived at a neighbouring village and asked for a drink of water. Refused by miserly villagers, he retaliated by sending a magic flood to drown them all, and thus created the lake. Even today villagers in Bangoi-Kouni are said to offer a coconut to thirsty travellers to prevent the same fate befalling them. The vibrant blue saltwater lake sits in a deep crater between the shore and RN3, about a kilometre or so east of Bangoi-Kouni. It's easily visible from the main road, and you can walk around the crater rim, with great views of the coast.

M'BENI

M'beni is home to Grande Comore's only official ecotourism attraction – an essential oils distillery and experimental farm known as **Comores Vanille et Plantes** (☎ 77 02 34; www.comores-online.com/cvp/ecomusee.htm in French; admission free). There's a shop selling spices, essential oils, jam, honey and local crafts; a distillery and vanilla treatment plant; an interesting collection of local plants and herbs; and even a pen full of ostriches! Most of this is designed to find new ways of improving agricultural production by breeding strains of plants and trees resistant to disease, but it's also a well-thought-out tourism project, and a green and pleasant place to visit. There's a small snack bar, too.

CHOMONI

Sheltered by a bay and with a fascinating mix of black lava and white sandy beach, Chomoni, about halfway down the east coast, is the best beach along this part of the island. You can stay at the basic **La Guinguette** (☎ 77 62 21, 33 52 40; r CF7500), which has palm-thatch bungalows with nets right on the beach, but limited toilet facilities (be prepared to squat). Excursions around the island are available and you can snorkel out front – La Guinguette has the gear. The restaurant serves curries and fish and rice dishes (mains cost from CF3000 to CF5000). Soft drinks come out icy cold.

ICONI

Arrr! Grande Comore's oldest settlement and original capital, Iconi, is rich in pirate lore. At one time the seat of the Sultan of Bambao, Iconi suffered badly at the hands of Malagasy pirates between the 16th and early 19th centuries. In 1805 a particularly determined wave of pirates sent many of the inhabitants of Iconi fleeing the town. When the invaders killed their leader, the women of Iconi threw themselves off the cliffs into the sea rather than face capture.

In March 1978, a second tragedy took place in Iconi when Ali Soilih's youth gangs massacred unarmed citizens protesting against his policies forbidding Comorian tradition and religious fervour. There's a plaque commemorating them on the wall of the sultan's palace in the centre of the village.

The most imposing buildings in Iconi are the 16th-century **Palais de Kaviridjeo** (the former home of the sultan), and the still-

shiny **Nouvelle Mosquée du Vendredi** (New Friday Mosque).

MOHÉLI

pop 36,885

Mohéli is the Comoros island you go to when you want to drop off the planet for a while – the one we said even a hunted fugitive could blend into. It's wild, undeveloped and sparsely populated (except for, strangely, lots and lots of donkeys, far more in fact than on the other islands). A visit to this, the smallest and most interesting of the Comorian islands, is a highlight of any Comorian trip. There is no question about Mohéli's backwater status: this island hasn't caught up with the 20th century yet, let alone the 21st. But this is a very good thing. While the other islands offer capitals with trash-strewn streets, Mohéli is relatively clean by Comorian standards. Plus this island is home to the only national park in the Comoros, Parc Marin de Mohéli. Nature lovers looking to explore the dramatic, craggy islets off Mohéli's golden shores or

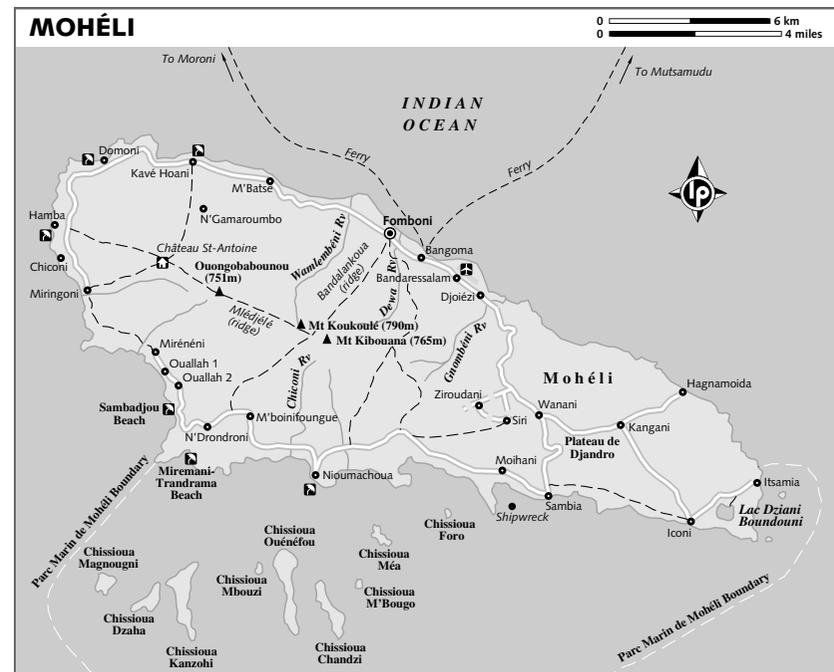
snorkel amid the colourful coral reefs, splashing about in the clear aquamarine water off the southwest coast, will love it here.

Also known as Mwali or Moili, Mohéli is a favourite with fans of sea turtles and marine mammals such as dolphins and whales. All are protected in the national park. Bird-watchers will also find plenty to interest them at Lac Dziani Boundouini on the eastern edge of the island, where there's also a good chance of spotting the rare mongoose lemur in the remaining stands of rainforest.

Mohéli doesn't have many modern amenities, but it kicks too much arse in the raw-beauty department to care. For many travellers this lack of organised tourism is what makes the island so special in the first place, and many consider a visit here the most interesting and inviting in the Comoros. An excellent ecotourism project funded by the EU means that simple bungalow accommodation is easy to find in attractive spots all over the island.

History

In 1830 the Malagasy prince Ramanetaka arrived on Mohéli (up to this time the island



was dependent on Anjouan) and staged a coup that left him in power as sultan. He was succeeded by his young daughter, Djoumbé Saoudy, who took the name of Fatima I.

The French hoped to get a foot in Mohéli's door by sending a governess, Madame Droit, to see to the young sultaness's education, but this was to no avail. Love, however, succeeded where education failed. Fatima began an affair with the Frenchman Joseph François Lambert, a trader, adventurer and ship owner from Mauritius who had been made a duke by the queen of Madagascar. Lambert was able to gain control of great tracts of land on Mohéli and set up plantations with his British partner, William Sunley. In 1867, after the affair had begun to wane, Fatima abdicated the throne and fled the Comoros with a French gendarme, opening the way for the island to become a French protectorate.

Throughout colonialism and the independence that followed, Mohéli, by virtue of its small size and low economic value, was forced into a back-seat position in the affairs of the Comoros. In the 1990s after years of 'humiliation' by France and the independent Moroni-based government, Mohéli's leaders declared its independence from the other islands. Reconciliation with the Moroni government was only achieved in April 2000, when Mohamed Saïd Fazul was elected leader of Mohéli under a new constitution that kept the three islands as one nation, but provided each with greater autonomy. If the new constitution lasts long enough, it should be Mohéli's time to elect a Union president – the post is supposed to rotate between the three islands every four years, and presidents from Moroni and Anjouan have served or are serving. Mohéli's people also hold the most positive outlook of the three islands when it comes to retaining one nation status.

Orientation

Mohéli's small size makes it easy to explore if you have your own car, although not all the roads are tarmac. Taxis-brousses can't quite circle the island as they can't do the stretch between Mirénéni and Miringoni. The Parc Marin de Mohéli encompasses the whole south coast, from Itsamia to N'Drondroni, and the islands off Nioumachoua.

Information

Mohéli is the smallest and least developed of the Comoros. Medical facilities are severely limited

and if you develop any serious health problems, you'll need to fly to Mayotte. There are telephone, email and postal services in Fomboni, and cybercafés are slowly catching on.

Hiking

Mohéli is so small it's easy to traverse the island in one long day, or you could camp midway. A particularly fine walk begins along the Dewa River southeast of Fomboni, then climbs steeply up to the interior of the island and eventually descends to the south coast a couple of kilometres east of Nioumachoua.

Another route, across the western end of the island, begins at Miringoni, then climbs steeply through rainforest and agricultural land to the ruined mountain hut of Château St-Antoine atop the Mlédjélé ridge. From here it's about a 1½-hour walk to Kavé Hoani on the north coast. The same trek can be started at Hamba, a beach about 3km north of Miringoni.

Getting There & Around

Transport throughout the island is very, very slow and patience is mandatory – even the aeroplanes don't always fly if they're not full. Bring a good novel or four.

AIR

The Mohéli airport is in the north-coast village of Bandaressalam, about 4km east of the capital Fomboni. Taxis-brousses run sporadically along the road past it into town (CF100) or you can try to hitch.

Mohéli is served by both the Comoros' internal airlines, **Comores Aviation** (Map p248; ☎ 72 03 86) and **Comores Air Service** (Map p248; ☎ 72 01 55). Flights go at least three times a week to Mayotte (CF50,000), Anjouan (CF20,000) and Grande Comore (CF20,000). Both airline offices are in the main street of Fomboni.

BOAT

Mohéli isn't as well served by boats as the other three Comoros islands; its small size means that it is often ignored by cargo boats. Nonetheless, some boats arrive and depart reasonably regularly to and from the neighbouring islands – try *Alliance des Iles* to Grande Comore (CF9150, four to six hours).

To find out about boat movements, look for bits of paper on the 'message trees' (Map p248) in front of the police station in Fomboni's main street. Boats usually come in to the port at Bangoma, 1.5km southeast of the town centre.

CAR & TAXI-BROUSSE

All car hires places on Mohéli cost the same – CF15,000 per day plus petrol. Most sleeping places can either hire cars themselves or find you one. Just ask at reception. Try Akmal Bungalows (right).

Taxis-brousses go from Fomboni to points across the island, including Miringoni (CF500, 1½ hours), Ouallah 1 and 2 (CF600, 2½ hours), Itsamia (CF300, one hour) and Nioumachoua (CF600, two hours). Most places only see one or two taxis-brousses per day, so it's hard to do a day trip to any of them, but there are simple bungalows in each of these villages if you need to stay the night.

FOMBONI

pop 4665

Fomboni is quiet and sleepy in the extreme. There's no old Arab town like those in Moroni and Mutsamudu, and most of the buildings are low-rise and low-tech. Once you've walked up and down the nameless main street a couple of times, cast an eye over the market and visited the jetty, you've pretty much experienced all that the town has to offer. Mohélians are a bit quieter and less outgoing than their counterparts on Grande Comore and Anjouan, but they are still unfailingly friendly and courteous. So, as long as you aren't looking for action-packed entertainment, Fomboni is a good place to just wander about, taking in everyday Comorian life.

Orientation

Fomboni has just one main street, which arrives from the airport in the southeast, meanders along past the market and the government buildings next to the shore, passes the Hotel Relais de Singani then goes west towards Domoni. Taxis-brousses can generally be found just outside the market or at the junction just past the Comores Aviation office. Standing on the appropriate side of the main street and waving at any that pass will get you where you need to go.

Information

There's no full-time bank on Mohéli, just a part-time branch of the BIC, open every second Tuesday morning, when the 'bank' arrives by plane in a canvas bag!

Centre de Ressources (☎ 72 04 60; per 10min CF450; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 3-5.30pm) Fast and reliable internet access.

Hospital (☎ 72 80 38) Main street.

Police station (☎ 72 01 27) Main street.

Sights & Activities

There's not a lot in the way of official sights in Fomboni. You can take a look at the very overgrown gravestones of Joseph François Lambert (opposite) and his business partner, William Sunley, in the **Christian cemetery** next to the football ground; on the other side of the pitch are some even more overgrown **Shirazi (Persian) tombs**, where simple plaques are buried amid piles of waste and rubbish. Or wander around the small **market** down by the shore and marvel at the size of the fish.

Sleeping & Eating

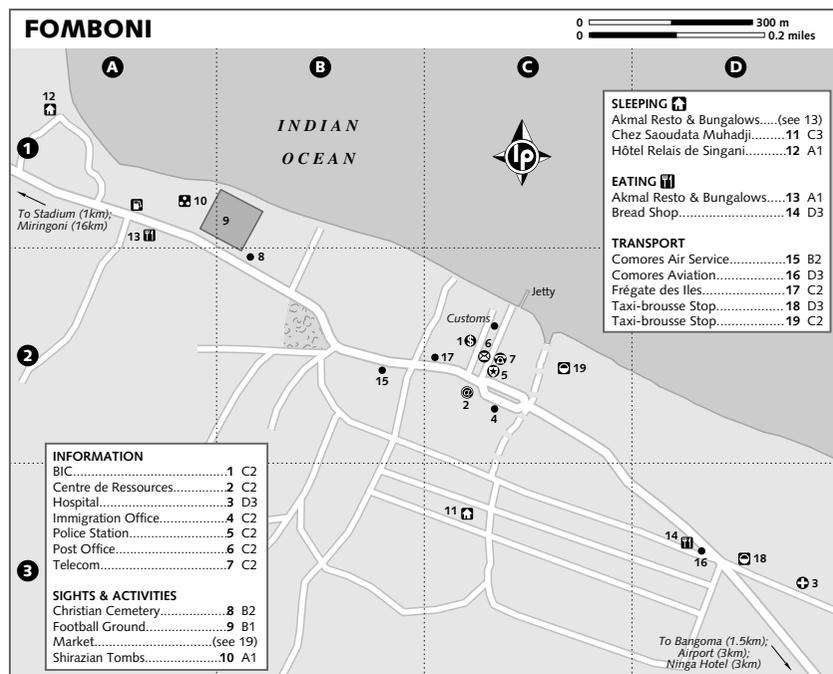
Fomboni has a handful of places to sleep and eat. Self-catering places are very limited, however, and the market really only carries tinned sardines, cheese spread and veggies. Try the **bread shop** (☎ 9am-noon), next door to the Comores Aviation office, for fresh loaves to make into sandwiches.

Chez Saoudata Muhadji (Pension Parsifra; ☎ 72 05 21; r from CF6000) This very friendly little B&B has nice little rooms with fans, nets and spotless vinyl floors. Grey shutters, black-and-white pillows and padded chairs add a level of thoughtful comfort. Bathrooms are shared. The building is unmarked, so you'll have to ask the way – everybody knows it. Dinner is also available (mains CF2000).

Ninga Hotel (☎ 72 08 45; Bandaressalam; r CF6500) The cheapest and most basic of Fomboni's hotels, the newly christened Ninga is right opposite the airport. It's shabby but cheerful, with a good restaurant serving main dishes from CF1500.

Hotel Relais de Singani (☎ 72 05 45; r CF11,000-17,000) This claims to be Fomboni's most upmarket hotel, and it is a bit more polished than the rest – air-con is an option in the most expensive rooms. There are also TVs, en suite bathrooms and mozzie nets. Cars can be hired here at the usual rate, and bicycles are available for CF4000 per day. Excursions to the islets are CF7500 for a day tour. A cybercafé is planned. Meals (mains from CF2500) must be ordered in advance.

Akmal Resto & Bungalows (☎ 72 00 50; akmalresto@yahoo.fr; set meals CF3000 to CF4000) Fomboni's only real restaurant serves absolutely huge meals. The dishes change nightly but usually include fish or chicken accompanied by giant salads and followed by fruit. Seafood night includes



massive lobster. Next to the restaurant you'll find good little straw bungalows (singles/doubles with breakfast CF10,000/16,000) with private bathrooms (cold water only), nets, fans and even TVs! The manager is very knowledgeable about the island and has cars for hire (CF15,000 per day, including driver).

Getting There & Around

For information about getting to/from Fomboni, see p246.

AROUND MOHÉLI

With sandy beaches, primary rainforests, tranquil lakes and best of all, the fascinating offshore islets of the *parc marin* (marine national park), Mohéli is a fantastic place to explore on foot or in a car. There are ecotourism projects in the villages of Itsamia, Nioumachoua, and at Ouallah 1 and 2.

Itsamia

Itsamia is a fairly substantial village with a sweep of sandy, if slightly grubby beach. **Sea turtles** visit the beach at night during high tide to lay their eggs. Visitors can observe the turtles with the

help of a local guide, and then learn more about the life of this endangered animal in the education centre, known as La Maison des Tortues (Turtle House). Guides cost CF1500 per person, and you'll need a good torch, although you mustn't shine it directly on the turtles until they have started to lay eggs (see p258).

There are simple **bungalows** (r with private bathroom CF5000) on the beach at Itsamia, and a small restaurant area. Meals can be arranged for about CF1500. You can camp here for a one-off fee of CF1000.

Nioumachoua & the Parc Marin de Mohéli

Nioumachoua is Mohéli's second-biggest community, although it's nothing more than a hot, dusty low-rise village without any proper hotels. The magnificent view compensates for the lack of human-made beauty – you can see the five islets of the *parc marin* rising steeply out of the sparkling turquoise sea just offshore. Some are ringed by tempting yellow-sand beaches. The beach in the village itself is similarly wide and golden, but fairly dirty. Instead head a little outside the villages, where

the beaches are cleaner, deserted and fronted by fantastic aqua water.

The Nioumachoua ecotourism association (known to the locals simply as L'Association) has a boat for hire that takes visitors out to the islands for snorkelling, picnics or overnight stays. The cost is a steep CF14,000 per boat, or CF17,000 if it comes back the next day to pick you up. A guide to show you the good snorkelling sites costs CF3000. There are no facilities on the islands; you will need to pack everything to take in and out.

Makwe (☎ 726055) sells his handicrafts at the association and for a small fee will take you up the little hill behind the association's bungalows to check out the most massive baobab around – one reader estimated its trunk at 30m in circumference! The tree is in the middle of an old Shirazi village that's now in ruins and makes a fascinating photograph.

Speaking of bungalows, L'Association maintains a row of little **bungalows** (CF5000), which have nets, bathrooms and electricity. They're easy to find, right under the baobab trees next to L'Association headquarters. Next door is the **Restaurant Baobab** (mains CF2500), a cute-looking straw hut with local cloths on the tables. It serves fish dishes, manioc, bananas and so on. Readers have said the lobster here is the best in the Comoros.

Ouallah 2

The next village after Nioumachoua is confusingly known as Ouallah (or Wela) 2. It's a tiny little place elevated a few hundred metres above sea level, with the stunning beach of **Sambadjou** just downhill from the village. Nearby is the **Cascade de Mirémani**, a waterfall that cascades prettily on to the beach. The **bungalows** (s/d incl breakfast CF5000) are in a beautiful spot on the beach and are some of the nicest on the island – the locals who own them are making quite an effort. Facilities have been upgraded, and the bungalows have electricity and shared showers and toilets. A restaurant under the property's one tree is being constructed. For now meals can be cooked to order. There's a boat for hire.

Ouallah 1

Ouallah 1 is the last village accessible by taxi-brousse from Nioumachoua, and is home to the grandly titled Maison des Livingstones, an ecotourism centre named after the giant Livingstone's fruit bat. There is a set of well-

built **bungalows** (s/d incl breakfast CF5000) with nets and a separate sanitation block. Meals can be cooked to order from about CF1500.

There's also a guide (CF3000 per person or CF5000 per couple) available to walk with visitors through the forest to the roosting place of the bats. It's a steep and slippery three-hour walk there and back, and the bats, when you reach them, are a bit far away to see clearly. But it's still worth doing for the experience of walking in the forest and the chance to learn more about the island's flora – the guide will explain the various plants used in local medicines.

Miringoni

Isolated somewhat by its lack of a decent access road from Ouallah 2, Miringoni is set among thick vegetation on the west coast of Mohéli. You can walk to town from Ouallah 2 in about three hours – ask locals for directions or hire a guide to show you the shortcuts. If you do the walk at low tide, it's possible to follow the coastline along the beach. This is a gorgeous hike that gives access to beautiful hidden coves that are hardly ever visited. You must time the walk right though, because once the water comes in it will get dangerous.

You can stay in the village's only **bungalow** (CF3000), which has lovely views of the coast. You can also find an eco-guide here to take you into the forest. Meals can be arranged. More bungalows are planned, but these are village initiatives and take money to construct. A quad-bike tour company is also in the works, and once up and running the bikes will be able to do the rough 9km dirt track leading to the Ouallah–Mirémani highway, giving the village more tourism accessibility and possibilities.

ANJOUAN

pop 286,000

Called the 'pearl of the Comoros' by its residents, Anjouan is no doubt the most scenic of the Comoros and fulfils any lifelong fantasies of playing Robinson Crusoe on a deserted tropical island. Known by the locals as Nd-zouani or Nzwani, this is also the Comorian island that most closely resembles the image most people conjure up when daydreaming of kissing a lover in an exotic far-flung destination. The air here really is heavy with the scent of cloves and ylang-ylang, and the magic landscape includes crumbling old Arab

plantations, endless rows of palms, and trees whose branches are heavy with a load of ripening yellow bananas.

Through this mosaic of green moves the rural population: the women swaying under their loads of firewood or stacks of cassava; the men, machetes in hand, setting off in the cool of the morning to cut new palm thatch for their roofs. Up in the highlands, the air is blissfully cool and mists often descend over the trees of the rainforest, dripping moisture on to the giant, swooping bats who call the trees home.

The Anjouanais are fiercely proud of their identity, declaring independence from the rest of the Comoros in 1996. They have been reluctantly coaxed back into the Union – it helps when your president is the top chief in

the Comoros – but relations remain uneasy with the other islands.

History

During the latter part of the 19th century, Sultan Abdallah III of Anjouan ran into problems with his long-term supporters, the British, over his continued holding of slaves. When he agreed to halt the practice, Anjouan's landowners revolted – they depended on slaves to farm their plantations. In April 1886 the ageing sultan travelled to France, which had a more relaxed approach to the issue of slavery, and signed the treaty making the island a French protectorate. In 1912 the island joined the other three Comoros in becoming a full colony of France.



The destinies of the three islands remained on a parallel course throughout the series of coups d'état that characterised politics in the Comoros over the next 12 years. But in March 1996 the volcanic tensions created by years of federalism and centralism finally erupted.

In 1997 the Anjouan government, led by the self-elected president Ibrahim, declared full independence from the federal government in Grande Comore. Almost immediately guerrilla war broke out between the supporters of President Ibrahim and those who wanted Anjouan to remain part of the federation.

Anjouan rejected any attempt to bring the island back into the federal republic until 2001, when a new 'military committee' led by Major Mohamed Bacar seized power on Anjouan with the aim of rejoining the Comoros. Bacar survived two coup attempts in quick succession, and held on to power long enough to become president of Anjouan in the elections held in April 2002. In 2006 Ahmed Abdallah Sambi of Anjouan was elected president of the Union by a 60% majority. He has pledged to clean up Anjouan's cities.

Orientation

Anjouan's airport lies just outside the village of Ouani, about 6km north of the capital, Mutsamudu. Boats arriving in Anjouan come into the port in central Mutsamudu. Anjouan is shaped like an elongated triangle, with three main roads connecting the major towns on the island – Bamba, Domoni and Mutsamudu.

Information

The larger towns of Anjouan have telephone and postal services, but only very limited fax and email facilities are available in Mutsamudu.

The BIC (p252) in Mutsamudu can change cash and travellers cheques. There are no moneychanging facilities at the airport, so make sure you have enough euros (or US dollars) to pay for a taxi to your hotel, and to last until you get to the bank.

Medical facilities in Anjouan are extremely limited, with hardly any supplies, so you will need to fly to Mayotte should you require anything remotely serious.

Hiking

Anjouan is in many ways the best of the Comoros islands for hiking, as its wooded highlands have the coolest climate. Try to

walk from the coast into the hills rather than the other way round, so that you've reached enough altitude to stay cool by the time the sun is at its height.

THE CRATER LAKES

On the slopes of Mt Ntingui are two crater lakes, Lac Dzialaoutsounga (697m) and Lac Dzialandzé (910m). Together, they make a nice day trek from the village of Bamba on the east coast or from the village of Koni-Ngani to the west. To do the walk, trek or find a taxi-brousse to Dindi, about 7km west of Bamba. From Dindi, the track climbs, passing Lac Dzialaoutsounga on the left and after 2km arrives at the Col de Pomoni. The track to the right climbs for 1km through a semi-wooded area to Lac Dzialandzé. From here you can walk around the lake, with great views of the crater and surrounding farmland, to Koni-Ngani, where you can pick up a taxi-brousse back to Bamba, and then on to Domoni or Mutsamudu.

MT NTINGUI

Normally covered by clouds, it's a hard and steep climb from Lac Dzialandzé to the 1595m summit of Mt Ntingui, the highest point on Anjouan. On a rare clear day, it affords a view over all four islands of the archipelago. At this point, you can either descend to Mutsamudu or return to the Col de Pomoni, and descend through the village of Lingoni to Pomoni on the west coast. Alternatively, you can climb up to Mt Ntingui from Mutsamudu – follow the road from Mutsamudu to the village of Hombo, then ask your way from there.

JIMILIME & THE NORTHEAST

The far northeast of Anjouan, accessible only on foot or by boat, offers another option for exploring off the beaten path. One easy day walk begins at Col de Patsi (700m), which is about 11km above Ouani. The trekking route begins by ascending 1090m-high Mt Djadjana, then following the ridge down through inhabited areas to the traditional village of Jimilime. You can also walk from Ouani directly over the ridge and down to Jimilime and Hayoho on the opposite coast.

Getting There & Around

Transport around the island is slow, just like everywhere else in the Comoros, especially along the remote east coast.

AIR

Anjouan is served by both the Comoros' domestic airlines: **Comores Aviation** (Map p253; ☎ 71 04 82; nts.mutsa@snpt.km; Mutsamudu) and **Comores Air Service** (☎ 71 12 32; Ouani). Flights go from Anjouan to Mayotte (CF50,000), Moroni (CF30,000) and Mohéli (CF20,000) almost every day, but for flights to destinations further afield, you'll have to connect in Mayotte or Moroni. There are also two flights per week to Dar es Salaam in Tanzania (CF170,000).

BOAT

The port in Mutsamudu is well served by the region's sea traffic. To find a boat to your chosen destination, check the chalked-up ship movements on the blackboards propped up at intervals along the seafront. Alternatively, just ask around in the town square or contact **Agence Tourisme Verte** (RECA Mroni; Map p253; danielmoitane@yahoo.fr; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-9pm), also in the town square.

CAR

If you're driving around Anjouan in September, try to avoid the carpets of cloves spread out to dry on the roads! **Agence Tourisme Verte** (Map p253; danielmoitane@yahoo.fr; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-9pm) in Mutsamudu's town square rents cars for about CF20,000 per day, including driver and fuel. If you hire a guide (some of whom speak English), it costs another CF12,000 per day.

TAXI-BROSSE

Taxis-brosses are infrequent and slow down after 3pm. In Mutsamudu, taxis-brosses leave from the town square in front of the post office. There are regular services between Mutsamudu and Domoni (CF550), Bimbini (CF500), Ouani (CF150) and Moya (CF200) from early morning until mid-afternoon. Distances are short, but the steep and winding roads mean the journey is slow going.

MUTSAMUDU

pop 24,962

Despite a campaign to clean it up, Mutsamudu remains smelly and filthy. Shells of burnt-out cars and piles of rubbish litter the streets, choking the shoreline and the river that runs through the town square. Cattle live on the garbage, munching away on the refuse and defying veterinary science by looking surprisingly healthy.

If you can handle the stench, you might be able to enjoy Mutsamudu's attractions – plus

there are ongoing campaigns to tidy up the town. The narrow, spice-scented streets of the large and well-preserved *medina* (founded in 1492) and the views from the ruined citadel are especially wonderful. So too is the friendly, laid-back atmosphere of the seafront and the town square, where you can chat with the old men in their immaculate white robes, fingering prayer beads as they gather outside the mosques.

Orientation

Most of Mutsamudu stretches along two parallel (unnamed) main streets, from the port area to the Hôtel Al Amal about 750m away. Between the two streets is a fascinating maze of lanes and shops in the *medina* (the old Arab quarter). Next to the port is the town square, where you will find the main offices, the bank, taxis-brosses and most of the town's unemployed menfolk.

Information

Agence Tourisme Verte (RECA Mroni; danielmoitane@yahoo.fr; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-9pm) For car hire, excursions and information about boats; in the town square. Monsieur Daniel can also arrange homestays with local families, and provide guides for hiking (CF20,000 per day). The office is right next door to the BIC.

BIC (☎ 71 01 71; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) The only bank on the island; in the town square.

Centre Médical Urbain de Mutsamudu (☎ 71 13 07) Medical emergencies.

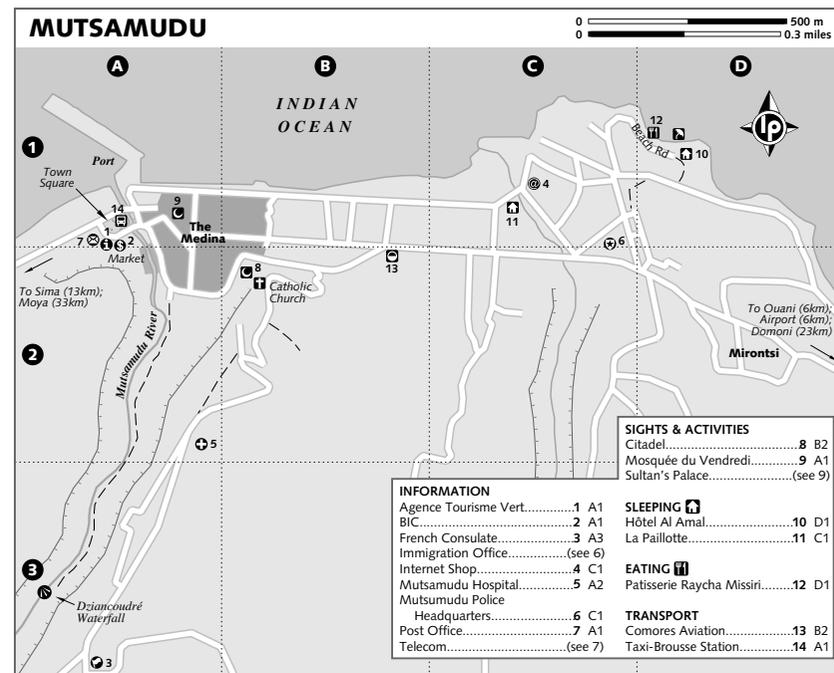
Internet Shop (☎ 71 15 28; per hr CF600; ☎ 8.30am-8pm) About 70m up the road from La Paillotte, on the way to Hôtel Al Amal.

Mutsamudu police headquarters (☎ 71 02 00)

Sights

Overlooking Mutsamudu, up a steep stairway from the road above the *medina*, is the ruined, cannon-laden **citadel**, constructed with British money in 1860 to defend the town against Malagasy pirates. The citadel was damaged in a 1950 cyclone, but still affords great views across the town and the new harbour, which was financed by Arab interests.

Wandering through the narrow stone streets of the *medina* is the best form of sight-seeing in Mutsamudu. You can stop to admire the **Mosquée du Vendredi** (Friday Mosque), the half-ruined **Sultan's Palace** and the occasional **covered bridges** that link one side of the street to the other. These bridges were constructed centuries ago to allow high-born Swahili women



to visit friends and neighbours without having to show themselves immodestly in the streets. Likewise, the smooth **stone benches** (*barazas* in Comorian) set into the doorways of the richer houses allowed the master of the household to receive male visitors outside without compromising the propriety of his womenfolk.

There is also an easy walk from Mutsamudu up the river gorge to the pretty **Dziacoudré Waterfall**. The only decent **beach** within walking distance of town is run by the Hôtel Al Amal. Nonguests can use it for a small fee.

Sleeping & Eating

Eating and sleeping options are few and far between in Mutsamudu, and all are relatively expensive, although there are a couple of food stalls in the town square, which sell fresh bread and the occasional beef kebab most evenings. Nightlife is nonexistent.

La Paillotte (☎ 71 05 24; s/d CF12,500/17,500) The rooms behind this very good restaurant are nicely decorated, and those on the 1st floor have TVs, fans, nets and hot water. The restaurant serves a good, but limited, menu (mains CF4000 to CF6000) that includes lobster.

There are omelettes at breakfast – yummy. The owners are friendly.

Hôtel Al Amal (☎ 71 10 17; sat@snpt.km; s/d €62/82; ☎) Anjouan's only 'proper' hotel even quotes in euros! It is a rather ubiquitous western-style hotel in a huge complex just over a kilometre from the centre of town. It has a small yellow-sand beach (sometimes covered in spilled oil) and fairly modern rooms with carpet, telephones and TVs. The restaurant, with a smart bar (it even serves cocktails), has a very grand menu (mains CF4000 to CF6500) featuring dishes such as *magret de canard* (duck fillet) and tuna carpaccio, although the most exotic dishes seem perpetually unavailable. The place also has internet access, although guests have to pay to use it (CF500 per hour).

Pâtisserie Raycha Missiri (Beach Rd; mains from CF1500; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Readers recommend this cheap and friendly place that looks out over the water for its friendly ambience and delicious food. The restaurant has a big menu of comfort French food, including *frites* (french fries), omelettes, *brochettes* (kebabs) and skirt steaks at less than exorbitant prices.

INTERIOR ANJOUAN

The interior of Anjouan, although heavily populated and farmed, is very beautiful and excellent for hiking and exploring. There are lots of opportunities for interesting walks; if you're feeling energetic, take camping gear and turn any combination of the three main routes (west of Bambao, north of Pomoni and south of Mutsamudu) into a cross-island trek. The roads are steep and dizzily winding – you'll need a steady nerve and a heavy hand with the horn if you're driving yourself. Once off the main roads, the paths are generally seasonal and very confusing – you'll either need to take a local guide or keep asking the way. Luckily the inhabitants of Anjouan are extremely friendly and happy to help, often walking several kilometres out of their way to put strangers on the right track.

For more details about hiking around Anjouan, see p251.

DOMONI

pop 15,351

The jury is out on this seaside town – some love it, others hate it, saying the seafront is ruined by oil and rubbish. Halfway down the coast, Domoni was the original capital of Anjouan and now has the second-largest population. The embroidery found here is especially beautiful, made by very skilled craftspeople. Domoni is also the source of some of the Comoros' finest woodcarving. The town is guarded by an ancient fortified wall and a ruined tower, built to protect the town from Malagasy pirates.

The old town is even more winding and maze-like than the *medina* in Mutsamudu, with carved Swahili doors and stone relief-work lintels on the bigger houses and palaces. Look out for the women painting each other's faces with sandalwood paste on the many staircases, and the little straw rooms constructed on the roofs of the stone houses to catch the sea breeze.

A more recent addition to Domoni is the **mausoleum** to former president Ahmed Abdallah Abderemane, assassinated in 1989 by his presidential guard. With its brilliant white walls and four high minarets, it's now the most imposing structure in town, if not the entire country.

Motel Loulou (☎ 71 92 35; r CF15,000; 🚻) is a few minutes' walk up from town towards the police station and the road to Ajaho. You can

also ask taxis-brousses to drop you there. The rooms are brand new and gleaming, with tiled floors, mosquito nets and private bathrooms. Breakfast or meals can be served on order – dishes are around CF3000.

Or you can stay at the nearby **Chez Ahmed Yahaya** (rind breakfast CF7500), about 100m up the road from Motel Loulou, close to the *gendarmierie*. Readers say the breakfast is huge. Rooms are simple, but fairly priced.

MOYA

pop 8100

Moya is where you should head in Anjouan. It's a wonderfully scruffy little village overlooking a beautiful white beach that some argue is as good as those on Mohéli and Mayotte. The beach is protected by a reef and offers excellent swimming and rock scrambling, as well as passable snorkelling when the seas are calm.

You'll be joined in the water by dozens of naked boys, who like to roll in the sand while wet and then offer their ghost-like faces for photographs. Be extra careful about leaving your possessions on the beach. Don't buy seashells from the local kids – the practice is illegal and environmentally harmful. Start early if you want to take a day trip on the taxi-brousse from Mutsamudu – the trip here can take up to 2½ hours. Better to stay overnight in the local hotel, enjoy a seafood feast and watch the spectacular sunset. If you're lucky you might catch a Comorian wedding – the beach is a very popular place to get married.

The only hotel is **La Sultan** (☎ 32 06 34, 71 14 33; rind breakfast CF7500), set above the beach in a shady spot with great views. The small rooms, which have shared bathrooms (someone in the family can often boil some water for you) and mosquito nets, are hot and basic, but the management is very friendly, the drinks are cold and the food is fantastic (mains CF2000 to CF4000), even if Chef Yusaf Houmadi can be a bit too liberal with the salt for some. Enormous lobsters in vanilla and coconut sauce are the house specialities. Order your meals at least two hours in advance.

If you just want something simple, check for small local stalls selling kebabs – called *brochettes* here – along with jackfruit and cassava. If you ask around, there are usually locals willing to fry you up fresh-caught fish (around CF500 to CF1000).

SIMA & THE WEST

Twenty kilometres west of Mutsamudu, Sima is one of the oldest settlements in the Comoros and certainly the oldest on Anjouan. Its **Mosquée Ziyarani** was constructed in the 15th century over the top of a mosque built in the 11th century. From Sima, the circular island route splits; the main road heads south towards Marahare and Moya, and another continues 5km west through Kavani, with the landscape becoming wilder on the way to the sheltered fishing village of **Bimbini**.

Head north on the road from Sima past the small village of Foubani to reach **Sombe Beach** – it's one of the best isolated beaches on the island and you'll more than likely have it to yourself. You'll find it between Foubani and the equally small village of Chididine, which is on the road back to Mutsamudu. The water here is very calm and you can dive off black rocks, the remnants of an old lava flow, into crystal-clear and calm water – it makes a great day trip if you bring along a picnic and perhaps a bottle of local rum... To reach the beach grab a taxi in Foubani or Chididine and get dropped off at the trail for Sombe Beach – the driver will know what you are talking about. If you don't negotiate a round-trip journey (prices vary depending on where you start) don't leave the beach too late; after 3pm, passing taxis on the main road become less frequent. To reach the beach follow the trailhead (it begins where the electricity wires cross the road) and slither down a rock and mud embankment to the strip of white sand.

MAYOTTE

pop 194,000

Yes, it has fantastic white sand, turquoise sea beaches and excellent diving, snorkelling and sailing, but otherwise Mayotte (Mahoré) is overpriced and some say over-Frenchified. A *collectivité territoriale* (overseas territory) of France, Mayotte differs from the other Comorian islands politically in that its people are French citizens governed by French law. As a result, French citizens don't need visas to holiday here, and the island is crammed with holidaymakers on packages from all over France. It also has a large expat and diplomatic community in its capital city.

Despite large infusions of money aimed at bringing the island's economy and infra-

structure into parity with the Métropole (as mainland France is known), Mayotte remains economically poor, with a clear gulf between the local population and the French expatriates.

Under French administration, Mayotte has for the most part enjoyed relative peace and stability, although the other three Comorian islands feel the Mahorais (as the people of Mayotte are called) sold out, and they uncharitably refer to them as 'the spoilt children of the republic'. To the casual visitor, both the Mahorais and Mayotte's French expats seem considerably less friendly than the inhabitants of the other three islands.

Budget travellers may want to steer clear of Mayotte. Thanks to bureaucrats receiving fat government salaries in euros, and lots of upmarket resorts, prices for meals and transport are the same, if not more, than in France. Bargaining is all but impossible.

History

During the mid-19th-century 'scramble for Africa', Sultan Adriansouli, who had gained quite a few enemies during his rise to power, formed an accord ceding the island to the French in exchange for protection from his rivals. The official transfer of Mayotte took place in May 1843 and the island was transformed first from a sultanate into a haven for French planters and slaveholders, and then into a full colony of France.

A majority of Mahorais voted against independence in a 1974 referendum, and when Ahmed Abdallah Abderemane unilaterally announced the independence of all four islands, Mayotte's leaders asked France for its intervention. French Foreign Legionnaires and a couple of warships were sent to patrol the territory, and the Comoros' transition to independence went ahead without Mayotte. Another referendum was held in 1976, during the height of Ali Soilih's chaotic reign in the independent Comoros, and this time a whopping 99% of the population voted to stay with France. The UN regularly calls on France to hand Mayotte back to the Union des Comores, but faced with a population staunchly opposed to a break with France the French seem disinclined to do so.

Orientation

The 'island' of Mayotte consists of three main islands: Grande Terre (356 sq km), the central island, which contains the largest town, Mamoudzou, and the adjacent industrial zone;



Petite Terre (Pamandzi; 18 sq km), where the airport is located; and the rock of Dzaoudzi, linked to Petite Terre by a causeway. The latter two islands are just a short ferry ride from Mamoudzou, which has the bank and main shopping area.

Information

The various shops, offices and businesses you'll need while in Mayotte are divided between Mamoudzou, Petite Terre and various villages around Grande Terre.

In an emergency, telephone Mayotte's **police** (☎ 17), **fire service** (☎ 18) or **hospital** (☎ 61 15 15). The latter is slightly better than its counterparts on the Union des Comores.

Be aware that you *cannot* change Comorian francs or Malagasy ariary anywhere on Mayotte. There are no moneychanging facilities at the airport, so make sure you arrive with enough euros to get yourself into town.

Activities

DIVING & SNORKELLING

Dive specialists report that Mayotte is one of the most biologically diverse sites in the world, with more than 600 species of fish inhabiting the great coral reef that encircles the island. The island is also on the migration routes of various species of sailfish and marlin. Not surprisingly the island has a number of dive companies. Prices range from about €55 for one dive to €220 for five dives. The following is just a selection of the companies:

Aqua Diva (☎ 61 81 59; aquadivadive@wanadoo.fr; Kaweni)

Lagon Maoré (☎ 60 14 19; jardin.maore@wanadoo.fr; N'gouja) Attached to Le Jardin Maoré hotel on the south coast. Also does boat excursions, whale-watching and big-game fishing.

Le Lambis (☎ 60 06 31; lambis.plongee-mayotte@wanadoo.fr; Blvd des Crabes, Dzaoudzi)

SAILING & BOAT TRIPS

With the biggest lagoon in the world, Mayotte is home to a plethora of sailing companies. Half-day excursions in the lagoon generally cost around €55; a full day on the water is €75.

Mayotte Découverte (☎ 61 19 09, 69 17 24; Mamoudzou) Does trips in an extraordinary craft called *Le Visiobul*, which has an enormous Perspex bubble underneath it!

Mayotte Voile (☎ 69 02 59; Plage de Sakouli) Based on the brown-sand beach at Sakouli, it offers sailing and windsurfing lessons, boat excursions and canoeing.

Sea Blue Safari (Map p259; ☎ 61 07 63; sea.blue.safari@caramail.com; Rue du Commerce, Mamoudzou) Specialises in dolphin- and whale-watching.

HIKING

Although not as scenic as the other islands of the Comoros, there are still a few good walks to be done in Mayotte.

Sazilé Peninsula

From the village of Mtsamoudou at the south-eastern corner of the island, there's an 8km circuit track that takes in the little-visited beach of Sazilé, where you'll find sea turtles offshore and the colourful dunes of Magikavo. Just offshore is the lovely exposed sand bar known as Îlot du Sable Blanc. This is a popular destination for day trips, but be warned that the beach is very exposed, with no shade.

The route can be easily walked in a couple of hours, excluding stops, but access to Mtsamoudou can be a problem, so allow all day for the trip. To get there from Mamoudzou, look for a taxi-brousse going directly to Mtsamoudou. If you're unsuccessful, take one going to Chirongui via Mtsamoudou and get off at Bambo-Est. From there, it's a 5km walk to Mtsamoudou and the start of the circuit. The way to the beach is marked by paint on stones. Boats to the islet will be easiest to find at weekends.

Getting There & Around

AIR

Mayotte is served by the following international airlines:

Air Austral (Map p259; ☎ 60 90 90; mayotte@air-austral.com; Place du Marché, Mamoudzou) Flights to Nosy Be and Mahajanga in Madagascar, Réunion and Mauritius.

Also has an office opposite the ferry terminal in Dzaoudzi.

Air France (Map p259; ☎ 61 10 52; issoufali.mayotte@wanadoo.fr; Place du Marché, Mamoudzou) Flights to France via Réunion.

Air Madagascar (☎ 60 10 52; tsc@snpt.km; Dzaoudzi) Weekly flights to Mahajanga and sometimes Nosy Be in Madagascar.

Air Seychelles (Map p259; ☎ 62 31 00; ario-mayotte@wanadoo.fr; Place Mariage, Mamoudzou) Flies weekly between Malé and Mayotte.

Alliance Papillon (☎ 62 54 45) Organises charter flights to Zanzibar (€390), Pemba (Mozambique, €310) and Diego Suarez (€340) in Madagascar.

Comores Aviation (Map p259; ☎ 61 62 00; comores.aviation-MAY@wanadoo.fr; Rue du Commerce, Mamoudzou) Tickets cost €100 to Moroni, €75 to Anjouan and €90 to Mohéli.

BOAT

Getting to/from Mayotte by boat is fairly difficult and very expensive, as the Mahorais authorities fix prices and bargaining is not possible. Boat travel in the Comoros can be dangerous. You should always inspect the vessel before boarding; most don't have any sort of life jacket on board, and some are in such dilapidated condition it doesn't seem like they'll make the trip. If the seas are too rough, boats don't run and you'll just have to wait where you are.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The cheapest car-hire deals are to be had at **MultiAuto** (☎ 69 22 99; location-multi-autos@wanadoo.fr; Kaweni; ☹ Mon-Sat), 1km from the town centre, which sometimes goes as low as €22 per day with unlimited kilometres. For scooters, try **Jéjé** (Map p259; ☎ 69 39 92; 27 Rue du Commerce, Mamoudzou) in Mamoudzou, which hires Vespa mopeds with helmet and lock for €20 per day. No-one on the island hires out mountain bikes.

TAXI-BROSSE

Taxis-brosses are reasonably priced on Mayotte – the fare is €3 to points north of Mamoudzou, such as M'Tsamboro (40 minutes), or €5 if you go as far south as N'Gouja (about an hour). There are three taxi-brosse stations in Mamoudzou – the one next to the port is for vehicles south, the one on Place du Marché has departures for the centre of the island, and the one a bit further down Ave Adrian Souli is for destinations in the north.

**GRANDE TERRE
Mamoudzou**

Most of Mayotte's shops, restaurants and businesses are concentrated in Mamoudzou, and the neighbouring industrial zone of Kaweni. Here European-style paint warehouses and tyre emporiums sit side by side with the same rotting vegetables, open drains and piles of rubbish you'd see in any developing country's port. All in all it's a sprawl, lacking any of the charm or architectural interest of the towns of the independent Comoros.

Although it's not the prettiest city in the world, Mamoudzou is the commercial heart of Mayotte, and you will probably find yourself coming into town to grab a bite to eat or do some shopping. Plus, if you're the type of traveller to come all this way to experience the Comoros, you need to see the less attractive places as well to get the full picture. It's ironic, however, that the island controlled by one of the world's superpowers is the most neglected of all the Comoros.

INFORMATION

To make telephone calls, you'll need to buy a *télécarte* (phonecard) for one of the public telephones. Cards are on sale at most shops and kiosks or at the post office. Dial ☎ 00 before international numbers. Calls to Europe or the USA cost about €0.25 a minute.

BFC-01 (☎ 61 10 91; Rue Mariazé; ☹ 7.30am-noon & 1.30-3.30pm) The only bank that will change foreign currency or travellers cheques and do advances on Visa and

RESPONSIBLE TURTLE WATCHING

- When in the water, keep your distance and avoid disturbing resting, sleeping or actively feeding turtles.
- Approach turtles slowly and calmly, and move away if the turtle shows signs of distress.
- Never try to feed, catch or ride turtles.
- Don't shine torches on the female turtles on the beach until they have started laying their eggs.
- Never shine torches or point camera flashes directly into turtles' eyes – photograph them from behind.
- Leave turtle eggs and hatchlings (baby turtles) undisturbed.
- Do not interfere with the hatchlings' crawl to the sea, as this could jeopardise their survival.
- Never photograph hatchlings – they are very sensitive to light.
- Limit your viewing to 30 minutes at a time.
- Never buy products made from turtle shells, or foodstuffs made from turtle parts – these are illegal.



MasterCard. It also has ATMs, which should theoretically give you money on a Visa card. This is the main branch and is directly opposite the ferry terminal. The bank gets horribly crowded, so get there about 30 minutes before opening to avoid the queues.

Comité du Tourisme du Mayotte (☎ 61 09 09; ctm@mayotte.tourisme.com; Rue de la Pompe; ☎ 7.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Very helpful. It also has a branch at the airport and smaller information kiosk by the ferry terminal, which is open on Saturdays. The best place to come for lists of the *chambres d'hôtes* (B&B-style accommodation) around the island, although the info isn't always up to date. Can also provide information on diving and sailing companies.

Cyber Club (☎ 62 62 1; 24 Route de Vahibé, Passamainty; per 10min €1; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat) Internet access just outside Mamoudzou; also serves snacks.

La Maison des Livres (☎ 61 14 97; marielaure.maison.des.livres@wanadoo.fr; Place Mariage) The best bookshop in the Comoros, with maps, guides to Mayotte and the surrounding countries, novels and magazines, all in French.

Main post office (☎ 61 11 03; Rue de l'Hôpital; ☎ 7am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 11am Sat)

Mayotte Vacances (Map p259; ☎ 61 25 50; mayotte-vacances@wanadoo.fr; Place du Marché) Organises boat trips and picnics on various islets in the lagoon, tours of Grande Terre and car hire. Prices average about €35/55 per person per half/full day.

SIGHTS

Îlot Bouzi, a large island in the Mayotte lagoon, is a fauna-conservation area for Mayotte's own species of lemur, *Lemur fulvus mayottensis*. Three hundred and fifty *makis*, as the lemurs are commonly known, roam the island, some of which are used to people and can be handled and stroked. You will be able to tell which animals are used to human contact by their lack of fear and their boldness in approaching you. Even if you are approached by a lemur, we'd advise against petting it. The more lemurs become tame, the more problems arise with the animals themselves – tourists are bitten and lemurs get hooked on junk food instead of their native nosh.

The *makis* are endangered in Mayotte because of poaching, culling by farmers (who blame them for raids on plantations) and encroaching urbanisation. The lemurs can be visited by contacting **Terre de l'Asile** (☎ 61 03 30), the conservation organisation that maintains the island. It has an information point in the tourist kiosk in Mamoudzou, just opposite the ferry terminal. A visit, including the 5km boat transfers, costs €15 per person.

SLEEPING

Most of the accommodation in Mamoudzou is aimed at visiting businesspeople and is therefore expensive.

Habitat Rose Doudou (☎ 61 04 48; rose.doudou@wanadoo.fr; 16 Route de Majimbini; r from €35) A quiet, family-run *chambre d'hôte* with a good choice of rooms and prices, and the opportunity to self-cater – there's a well-equipped kitchen for guests to use. You can also rent studios with bathroom, kitchen and one bedroom. The disadvantage is that it's quite far out of town. To get here follow the road past the hospital, then look for the signpost at the crossroads.

L'Horizon (☎ 65 95 98; 9 Rue Mahabou; r with breakfast €55; ☎) This is another homely *chambre d'hôte* with big, modern rooms with private bathroom. It's conveniently close to town and friendly, with good views over the lagoon. Reserve, as it's often full.

Caribou Hotel (☎ 61 14 18; hotelcaribou.mayotte@wanadoo.fr; Place du Marché; r from €85; ☎) Mamoudzou's most upmarket hotel comes with a restaurant and snack bar, business services and a slightly plasticky feel. The rooms, however, are comfortable and have satellite TV and telephones. The snack bar (sandwiches €6) is a popular meeting place for the town's French population.

EATING & DRINKING

There is a fairly good selection of restaurants in Mamoudzou, most of which double as bars. There's not much in the way of cheap eats – try the market stalls down by the port, which serve fried bananas and the occasional omelette for around €3, but get there early before the flies have done too much damage. You can also find evening food stalls around the stadium in the suburb of Cavani, to the west.

Le Vahine (☎ 61 14 49; 12 Rue du Stade; fish curries €7; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, dinner Sun) Excellent, friendly service, big portions and reasonable prices mean this cheerful place is often packed, although the menu is very limited. If you can't get a table, have a wander in the area, which has several cheap restaurants and cafés.

Les Saveurs des Îles (☎ 61 29 76; 10 Rue du Commerce; rice dishes €7; ☎ lunch Mon-Sat) One of the few places in Mamoudzou that serves down-home local cooking at reasonable prices, including delicious curries, chicken and coconut rice. It's on the 1st floor, away from the exhaust fumes.

Le Rond-point (☎ 61 04 61; 2 Rue du Commerce; mains from €16; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) A good wine list

and a cocktail menu complement the French gastronomy and lagoon view in this fairly classy establishment. It's popular with bureaucrats and expats for its authentic French cuisine.

ENTERTAINMENT

Given Mayotte is a part of France, you can drink like a sailor here. And Mamoudzou boasts two (fairly average) discos: the down-to-earth **Golden Lagon** (Rue du Commerce; admission €12) and **Le Mahaba** (Place du Marché; admission €15), next door to Mayotte Vacances, where a smart dress code is enforced.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

A regular ferry known as *le barge* takes cars, bikes, trucks and foot passengers between Mamoudzou and Dzaoudzi, with a journey time of about 10 minutes. Foot passengers cost only €1 per person, but cars are €20. You only pay on the Mamoudzou side. The ferry departs every 30 minutes between 6am and 10.30pm, then every hour until 12.30pm. There are ferries until 2.30am on Saturdays.

Within Mamoudzou, shared taxis cost a standard €1 for rides around town.

Around Grande Terre

Most of the route that encircles Mayotte is paved, but the uneven coastline, especially in the north, makes for lots of twisting and bending and is rather slow going, so don't try to cover too much ground in a day.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

As you travel around Mayotte, watch out for the interesting and colourful **bangas**, small bachelor houses constructed by young men and painted with humorous sayings and philosophies such as '*la vie célibataire est la vie superbe*' (the bachelor life is a superb life). Often, several friends will share the same *banga*, each encouraging the other to complete his education before marrying and starting a family.

Off the far northwestern tip is a group of islands collectively known as **M'Tsamboro**. They are very difficult to reach by public transport, but offer superb swimming and snorkelling. Mayotte Vacances (opposite) organises day trips by boat around the islands for about €55 per person.

On the chocolate-coloured west-coast beach of Soulou is the **Cascade de Soulou**, an unusual 8m-high waterfall that plunges di-

rectly into the sea (or onto the beach at low tide). Be careful if driving down the rough track that leads to the waterfall, 2km south of Mtsangamouji – hire cars are regularly trashed on this route.

Sea turtles often come and lay their eggs on the beaches of the peninsula of **Sazilé** in the extreme southeast of Mayotte, and the sand island opposite. To get here, it's a 4km walk from the trailhead on the road between the villages of Mtsamoudou and Dapani. If you're there in the daytime, you'll need to don a snorkel and fins to see the turtles, which are fairly wild and shy.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are a few scattered B&Bs and homestays in the villages around Mayotte, but these can be very hard to find. The best thing to do is get an up-to-date list of what's available from the Comité du Tourisme in Mamoudzou (opposite) before setting out, and ring ahead to get proper directions. There are no camp sites on the island, but in some places you may be allowed to pitch a tent. Likewise there are one or two little restaurants around the island, but you're mostly confined to the hotel restaurants listed here.

Hôtel Le Sakouli (☎ 60 63 63; sakouli.hotel@wanadoo.fr; Plage de Sakouli; r from €200; ☎) is Mayotte's most upmarket beach hotel, popular with French honeymooners. There is a fantastic horizon swimming pool, a Jacuzzi and a panoramic terrace. The rooms are big and tiled, with a TV, full-sized bathtub and balcony. If you come for lunch in the restaurant (€25) you are allowed to use the pool. Prices go up at Christmas and New Year and during school holidays.

A more rustic option is **Le Jardin Maoré** (☎ 60 14 19; jardin.maore@wanadoo.fr; Plage de N'gouja; r from €125; ☎). Not only are the prices a bit lower, but it is also on a much better beach, with the added draw of virtually guaranteed sea-turtle viewing. During the day you can snorkel with the turtles that live just off the beach, and during the night watch them come up on to the shore to lay their eggs. The food and service in the restaurant (buffet lunch €20) are generally average, but Le Jardin's bungalows are very well decorated, with raffia walls, draped mosquito nets and platform beds. There's also a fully equipped dive and water sports centre on site. The restaurant gets very busy with French expatriates at weekends. During

French summer holidays and Christmas, rates increase substantially.

PETITE TERRE

The island of Petite Terre, with two villages named Pamandzi and L'Abattoir, is connected to the rock of Dzaoudzi (a sort of poor man's version of the Rock of Gibraltar) by a causeway. Until the arrival of the foreign legion in 1962, it served as the capital of Mayotte, and still functions as its military centre. Two small islands comprise Petite Terre, which, being considerably quieter and cleaner than Mamoudzou, has become the affluent high-rent district of Mayotte. It's here that most of the European community lives.

The village of Pamandzi has a pretty, tranquil beach known as **Moya Plage**, and a volcanic crater called **Dziani Dzaha**, but there's very little of interest on Dzaoudzi beyond a few handsome colonial buildings and a single hotel.

Near the coast on the western side of Pamandzi is the archaeological site of **Bagamayo**. Researchers working at the site have uncovered pottery, tombs and glass beads indicating a 10th-century Shirazi settlement.

For sleeping try Petite Terre's most upmarket option, **Le Rocher** (☎ 60 10 10; lerocher@wanadoo.fr; Blvd des Crabes, Dzaoudzi; r from €65; 🍷). Expect lots of gilt, fake Grecian statues and potted palms, but the

cheesy décor is actually quite fun and the prices reasonable for Mayotte. Rooms are a bit worn but still comfortable. Some have balconies and views of the lagoon, while others come with full-sized bathtubs. There's a pricey onsite restaurant and a disco called **Ningha** (🎵 Mon-Sat), which charges €15 entry for men (free for women).

Villa Raha (☎ 62 03 64; 13 Rue Smiam, Pamandzi; r from €30) is the best budget option. The rooms are scruffy but acceptable overall and the location is nice and quiet. Some of the rooms share a little sitting area. Dinner (€10) can be arranged.

For typical French cuisine including frogs legs and crab specialities, try **Auberge de l'île** (☎ 60 14 57; Rte de Moya, L'Abattoir; mains €20), which has a rotating nightly menu.

For more of a bar atmosphere on the beach, try **Le Faré** (☎ 60 13 31; Blvd des Crabes, L'Abattoir; mains from €10; 🍷 dinner Tue, lunch & dinner Wed-Sun), which has a limited menu – usually a daily dish. It also has a pool table, however, and fills quickly on weekends.

Getting There & Around

The redoubtable *barge* brings passengers over to Petite Terre from Mamoudzou. Once you're there, you can whiz anywhere on the island in shared taxis, which cost between €1 and €1.50, depending on where you're going.